Affinity, Collaboration, and the Politics of Classroom Speaking

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Article:

In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women,* Donna Haraway defines a political organization by affinity which recognizes "permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints," where "struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals the dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point" (154). Affinity politics, as an alternative to identity politics, is driven by the choice of shared concerns and strategies rather than by fixed identificatory markers. It exists only through conscious, committed, and voluntary participation; it cannot outlast nor predate its members, nor claim the support of the uninvolved. These characteristics make affinity an apt model for a classroom devoted to the exploration of how identities are constructed and deployed through language and representation. In the Women's Studies and English literature and composition classes we have designed and taught together at the University of Rochester, we have used Haraway's concept of affinity as a foundation for structuring both our collaborative pedagogy and feminist syllabi. In sharing some of our experiences here, we suggest that affinity politics encourages an unusually open and frank classroom environment, which forces participants to be responsible for their contributions and silences. Our goal as teachers is neither to direct nor censor student comments, but continually to ask our students (what it means) to be accountable for their words.

Pursuing affinity as a pedagogical model means addressing, if not overcoming students' expectations of and desire for traditional classes. Of our nine collaborative classes, for example, eight were required freshman and sophomore English classes (the ninth was an upper-level Women's Studies course). Required courses challenge a fundamental principle of affinity politics— that of voluntary engagement. In order to meet that challenge, we spent the first day of class, during students' "shopping period," articulating our own goals and expectations for the semester: our emphasis on student participation, grading based on critical and analytical skills rather than on mastery of the subject, and the need we will all face of applying those skills to our own writing and thinking. Also on the first day, we tell students about the other options they have for fulfilling their English requirement. We describe the themes and approaches of comparable courses offered that semester, and we encourage students to find the course that is right for them. While we cannot drop the student whose goal for the semester is "to get my four credits," we can provide students with the information they need to make an informed choice of courses. Once the semester is underway, we use student-led discussions and our collaboration to shift students' focus from asking "what the teacher wants" to participating in a communal investigation of our various subject positions vis *a* vis our interpretations of the texts.

The distinction between individual identity and political identity is never fixed—in our teaching we acknowledge it as constantly blurred and always historically and socially situated. At the same time, we believe that maintaining a distinction promotes a continual dialogue between identity and politics, ensuring that neither is privileged over or subsumed within the other. Identity and politics emerge from this dialogue as contingent but not conflated, and it is this tension that enables a class both to validate and move beyond claims of "experience" that can foreclose class discussion as easily as open it. "It is the unspoken law of the classroom," Diana Fuss notes in *Essentially Speaking,* "not to trust those who cannot cite experience as the indisputable grounds of their knowledge" (116).' The effects of this law often include a hierarchical ordering of identities

(usually conceived of as oppressions) according to the topic at hand and a corresponding scale of legitimacy of participants' speech. Accountability thus becomes a question conforming to the political standards set by the most-valued speaker, a curious rearticulation of the very formula identity politics seeks to contest.

Our affinity-based pedagogy seeks to redefine accountability and authority in relation to the common goals we set for our classes. These goals emerge out of our class theme of "constructions of identity/identity as constructed." In contrast to a definition of identity based upon experience and physical markers, we work from an interrogation of identity as a nexus of language, power, and community. Asking class members to think critically about their private and political choices locates accountability in the interstices of their simultaneous identities. In a discussion of the film *Philadelphia,* for example, we focus on how the way we define ourselves as spectators dictates our responses to the film. While some class members read the Denzel Washington character's acceptance of the AIDS discrimination case as a symptom of class status, others find his motivation in the common racial and sexual discrimination he and his client respectively experience. Comparing these readings allows us as a class to ask not only how race and sexuality overlap within the movie, but more importantly how we can trace our various responses to the identities we each privilege and exclude as spectators. Difference becomes, then, in Christina Crosby's words, "a problem for theory and not a solution" (139). It is in looking at the difference between differences, finally, that we define responsibility as the conscious ranking of those differences. "Otherwise," as Crosby notes, "differences will remain as self-evident as identity once was, and just as women's studies once saw woman everywhere, the academy will recognize differences everywhere, cheerfully acknowledging that since everyone is different, everyone is the same. Such is the beauty of pluralism" (140).

Trying to unpack the relationship between our identifications and our readings of class texts helps us to recognize how this same relationship operates in our own writing. In an early composition assignment, for example, we ask students to write two short autobiographical essays, one "true" and one "false," and to try to make each equally believable to the class. Sharing these essays in class leads to a discussion of the ways in which we try to present ourselves to others, the voices and identities we assume, and what we hope they convey. Since this is the first work students share, it serves as a personal introduction to the class as a whole and to the link between language use and identity that is the focus of the semester. The assignment has the added benefit of equalizing us all in relation to the student whose work we are discussing. Students are most proud of their work when they trick us as their teachers; and it is in participating in the process of analyzing these essays that we reveal our own assumptions about students' identities and language use.

We designed our collaboration to emphasize jointly our shared commitment to responsible language use and contingent identities and our differences in approaching and working through these concepts. While we appear in front of class as white, middle-class women at the start of, we hope, our careers, we differ in the kinds of writing and texts we favor and in our political and academic backgrounds. In college Kirstin majored in English, with additional coursework in Psychology and Women's Studies. Her current work employs psychoanalytic and feminist theory to focus on twentieth-century American poets. Alexandra's undergraduate and graduate work in history, literature, and public policy informs her research on the intersection of psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory in contemporary literature. While our feminist perspective has grown out of a mutual theoretical interest, we use that perspective to different, though complementary ends. In both our research and our classrooms, Kirstin's emphasis is more often on internal psychic processes, whereas Alexandra's is on the social contexts of those processes. Clearly, these approaches are mutually dependent and constitutive, but their differences constantly remind us of the foundational nature of any methodology. Beyond the philosophical interests we share, our collaboration is made possible by a strong friendship developed over the course of graduate school. The stimulation collaboration provides, whether in our graduate seminars or in our classes, more than compensates for the added financial burden and course load of collaboration. In the English Department, collaboration means teaching four courses per semester rather than two. In Women's Studies, while we are heartily encouraged to teach collaboratively, we are not compensated for doing so, and we share one instructor's salary for the course.

Our pedagogy of affinity is founded upon an interrogation of political foundations combined with a belief that such foundations are necessary. At the same time, our differences, openly stated in class, disrupt the student-teacher opposition without suggesting that authority is not an issue in the class dynamic. The structure of our collaboration in the English Department corresponds to this relationship: each of us maintains final responsibility for the conduct of her separate classes, and we collaboratively teach both classes regularly, though not necessarily every period. (In Women's Studies, the class is fully collaborative, from the syllabus to attendance to grading.) That each of us grades her own students' work and outlines the goals for every session means that students do have a place to turn to in negotiating their own progress. At the same time, we collaborate as equal partners in designing syllabi, deciding on the format of each class, and interacting with students in order to emphasize our shared investment in this project. Because the class structure is dynamic—depending on whether we jointly teach that day—students can't come to rely on a single style of direction. On the days we collaborate in class, the typical student-teacher trajectory is fractured by the other teacher's presence; eye contact and questions are dispersed, and we encourage students to address each other and not just one or both of us. Class format varies from both of us sparking discussion to one of us presenting material, to both of us working with small groups of students. Our collaboration in class is not scripted. In interrupting one another to redirect conversation or questioning each other about our statements or questions, we make our own positions available for scrutiny and interrogation.

We decide when to attend each other's classes based on our relative strengths and weaknesses (ranging from every day to once a week), a strategy that works to further contest traditional classroom authority by exposing the teacher's knowledge as partial and in process. In order to give our students a variety of tools for analyzing cultural texts we frequently combine literary or artistic texts with social or political concepts. Such pairings in the past have included selections from Marx's *Capitol, Volume* 1 alongside Salman Rushdie's "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," and Freud's work on the unconscious with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper.* These texts reflect the individual backgrounds and approaches we bring to our collaboration. We alternate in presenting certain schools of thought while we simultaneously ask questions designed to unravel the assumptions that lie behind those schools. Juxtaposing Marx and Rushdie, for instance, allows us to challenge the belief that desire is instinctual or pure. Marx's writing on commodification helps students understand the relationship between social and economic value and desire. At the same time, Rushdie's blurring of the lines between fiction and reality combined with his whole-hearted embrace of aesthetic pleasures checks the tendency to apply Marxist theories absolutely. We often present texts in this way not to promote a particular political program, but to encourage students to examine the link between authorship and identity in new ways. Here again the textual readings become a springboard for looking at how our own word choices, metaphors, grammar, and subject matter reveal our values and identities.

Collaboration also serves as an invitation to students to join with us in the common, semester-long project of the class itself. The structure of the class enables students to express viewpoints in a variety of formats, formal and informal, individually and as a group. Opening up channels of communication outside the traditional essay, individual conference, and class discussion allows us to investigate, at the level of our shared classroom experience, how context and content of speech are related. In addition to formal essays required throughout the semester we ask students to write one-page, informal, typed responses to each reading assignment. While these responses may be directed to a particular question we pose or they may be open, in all cases they are informal in terms of technical writing in order to encourage students to think critically in whatever grammatical terms they can. This temporary lifting of technical rules, rather than divorcing clear thinking from its expression, frequently provides a forum for otherwise intimidated students. As teachers, we share these responses with each other and evaluate them—with a check, check-plus, or check-minus—as an additional form of class participation, rewarding critical, invested thought that turns to the text for evidence. We tell our students to use short responses to show us how they have begun to interpret readings, not that students have read them. Our written comments to the students on these mini-papers often expand into on-going dialogues spanning several texts and class discussions. In addition, short responses allow students to question the assignment at hand while simultaneously acknowledging its relevance for the class.

Beyond the formal essays and short responses, we require students to write responses to the lengthy comments we give their formal essays. We encourage students to use these responses to our comments as a space to confront, challenge, explain, defend, praise, question, or otherwise interact with the grading process. It is essential to our project to know how our comments are received, if they are valuable to students, and where they fall short. These responses, too, may result in lengthy correspondences which force both students and teachers to re-examine their criteria for and expectations of the grading system. For example, a student in one of our composition sections used this opportunity to question our "right" as teachers to demand he engage with a text he found "offensive": a speech by Malcolm X. Forced to explain our choices, we were simultaneously able to use this exchange to explore the nature of the "offense." This correspondence, lasting from the middle through the end of the semester, ultimately led the student to take responsibility for the racist overtones of his language, even as we were made to articulate the strategic necessity of offense.

Although usually one of the more vocal participants in this class of thirteen, this student, a white man in a class which was half white, initially preferred in this case to express his views privately to us. While class composition undoubtedly contributes to the comfort level of each student, we hesitate to proffer this as the sole explanation of this student's written responses; he frequently chose the classroom as a forum in which to encourage discussion about sensitive issues. The written exchange began with his response to Civil Rights speeches by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall. While the assignment was to evaluate the different strategies presented in these texts, this student took this opportunity to express his outrage with what he termed " Malcolm X's racism." In direct response to our comments in which we asked him to consider the possible differences between Malcolm X's separatism and white racism, he focused on the role of the "victim" in our contemporary culture. His reply is worth quoting at length:

> Unless things have changed drastically, a year of welfare is more expensive than a cheap boat ticket to Africa. Be that as it may, my point was that we do not see any groups of blacks asking to go back to the place where (as they say) their culture and identity was founded. They seem to be enjoying the mother of all pity parties. We are bankrupting the country to keep these people on welfare, and they are still demanding more. . . .
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> Blacks are the victims of welfare money handed to them with no strings attached, victims of our charity in the form of wildly inflated test scores, victims of the generosity of affirmative action institutions.
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> We will never be able to sink our differences as "blacks" and "whites" until we can learn to take people as individuals instead of members of an ethnic group. It is ridiculous that we are discriminating against ourselves in the name of equality. True equality is that we do not ask what color our skin is on tests, job applications, college applications, or anything else—it just doesn't matter. It is time we start acting like citizens of the earth instead of self-pitying, ethnic, victims.

This student's concluding argument, for individualism with the presumption of equal opportunity, motivated a response based on several levels of affinity. As a pedagogical approach, affinity both exhibits and demands a belief in collectivity. We used the occasion of the student's remarks on individualism and racism to answer both his concerns and his choice to write them to us rather than share them in class. The following excerpts are from Kirstin's written response:

> I agree with your statement that "we will never be able to sink our differences as 'blacks' and 'whites' until we learn to take people as individuals instead of members of an ethnic group." However, I disagree just as emphatically with your following assertion that skin color "just doesn't matter". . . .
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> The question then still remains: what is the best way to rid our nation of racism altogether?. . . As I have said, I am also wary of dividing society into "dominant" and "victimized" cultures. However, I think it is just as erroneous, and perhaps more harmful, to go ahead with discussion and legislation as if racism *didn't exist at all*.. .

> If you don't agree with Malcolm X's assertions and "promotion of racial hatred," then say so! Say so loud and clear so that you may open someone's eyes who is otherwise asleep! If you really care about these issues, as your emotionally invested responses suggest, then you must be willing to say what you think, even if it means being non-politically correct. People will learn from what you have to say, whether by seeing things in a new light or articulating an opposing point of view. Although you find Malcolm X's approach to be a wrong one, you certainly can't say he was apathetic or unwilling to put his life on the line for his beliefs.

By asking the student to engage with the class as a whole and to re-examine Malcolm X's strategy in the context of the other two readings, Kirstin's response prompted the student to join in the collective project of defining the "social good" from the standpoint of race. Back in the classroom, we were able to use our different approaches to the three texts to work from the student's initial outrage with Malcolm X to analyzing how these texts define their constituencies and their associative "rights."

In our attempt to advocate a politics of affinity, we see this kind of confrontation as vital; invested in the overall benefits of a traditionally graded system, we are likewise devoted to questioning the standards of that system. This assignment allows for discussion that moves outside the usual realm of student/teacher interaction; it opens up both positions to critique, thereby forcing each participant to take responsibility for his/her standing in the class.

Filmmaker Sally Potter ends *The Gold Diggers* with the words, "I know that even as I look and even as I see, I am changing what is there." It is that kind of self-awareness, hopefully leading to self-questioning, which we hope our assignments and class texts will foster. In choosing texts, we ask ourselves the following questions: How do we negotiate the line between honoring students' backgrounds and opinions and maintaining a "safe" classroom? How do we enlarge the chorus of voices both allowed and heard in the classroom? And, do students ever have a legitimate right to refuse to engage with a text on the basis of its language, images, or overall content? While we remain committed to the principle of a "safe" classroom, we believe it is only by taking risks implicit in broadening the range of class discussion that issues of language and identity become immediate to students and available for closer analysis.

We taught Nella Larsen's *Passing* in an effort to examine the ways in which we all negotiate membership in various social groups today, and to examine the relationship between bodily specificities and one's ability to use language in different contexts. We want to focus here on how this text has encouraged student use of personal disclosure to "authorize" specific speech acts and foreclose potential responses. In each of our sections, a student of mixed race has openly identified with the character Clare and used that identification as a basis for directing discussion. One example involved a "white" male student (one of whose parents, he later told us, is black) who in the midst of a discussion about Clare's "real" race announced "Well I'm black!" Discussion halted. Rather than illustrate the constructedness of race, his comment was designed to authorize his own reading of the text at the expense of all others. His peers, none of whom were black, were able to reenter the conversation only by questioning his strategy of privileging a heretofore hidden identity, a strategy that clearly revealed his assumption of their own "obvious" races. In another class, a self-identified light-skinned black student shared his interracial background as a way of making the dynamics of passing contemporary. While with his father's family he identified himself as black, he privileged his whiteness when with his mother's. By telling his story he enabled the class as a whole to see how race is both constructed and real. This fostered a class-wide affinity based on a common interrogation of race, rather than a narrowing of discussion along lines of racial authority.

At the center of our feminist pedagogy lies a commitment to challenging normative representations of identity. Examining these most naturalized representations involves a questioning of ontology itself and, as such, necessarily entails a willingness to risk the security it provides. Risk, then, becomes a pedagogical goal, one we sometimes approach through overtly controversial texts. Two examples include a campus exhibition of world-wide AIDS awareness posters and the film *Paris is Burning*. The poster exhibit provided a forum for

establishing a network of affinity between the classroom and other communities to which we belong; at the same time, the recognition of this network broadened the scope of sanctioned expressions within class. Holding class in the gallery, particularly during this sexually-explicit exhibition, undermined boundaries between the classroom and the wider campus community: the gallery remained opened during our classes, and others often joined our discussions. Some students went beyond the limits of the class to attend lectures on AIDS discourse which accompanied the exhibit. By enlarging the confines of the traditional class in terms of locale and content, we risked the expression of reactions we could not predict or control. In one session, a female student was clearly upset by the fetal images included in the exhibition; throughout much of the hour she sat quietly, but openly, crying. Her decision to attend class—after we had briefed the students on the graphic and potentially disturbing nature of the images—reflected her sense of safety there. Most importantly to us as teachers, it was the class as a safe environment that allowed her to engage with material she may otherwise have avoided; her reaction also made it more difficult for her peers to dismiss their own discomfort. It is only by exposing this discomfort that we can begin to unravel and respond to it critically. At the same time, it is to the credit of the students that they were able to overcome their initial discomfort upon entering the gallery in order to share with one another and other visitors their interpretations of the images.

Discomfort surfaced immediately in students' reactions to *Paris is Burning*. The documentation of homosexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites in New York City in the 1980s, not to mention their configuration in family units, elicited reactions ranging from disgust to amusement to compassion. To begin one of our upper-level sections, a student, slightly older than the others and working full time in addition to taking classes, asked to read an outside text aloud. He was one of the quieter students in class and only spoke when he had seriously thought through his comments. He introduced a selection written by Ron Hubbard which describes homosexuality in any form as deviant and pathological. The student ended his reading with the comment, "And I agree with Ron Hubbard." This statement resulted in one of those moments when, as teachers, we realize how powerful our authority may be in directing class disscussion. We were faced with the dilemma of responding viscerally to the content of his contribution versus legitimating his right to speak. The rest of the students also paused at this moment to gauge our reaction. While we don't hide our own positions in class, arguing from those positions here would have foreclosed a rich opportunity for critical rather than reactionary analysis. Our response, therefore, was to turn the student's comments back to the class as a whole, asking how one of the "house mothers" would respond to Hubbard. Students responded to this question by directly challenging the assumptions underlying Hubbard's rhetoric; consequently the initial student was called upon by his peers to investigate his own appropriation of that language. Moving beyond a willingness to tolerate the text to engaging critically with it required a collaborative effort. As each of us works hard to create a "safe" classroom forum, it sometimes takes the other's presence to risk the security of comfortable classroom discourse. We have consistently found that using our different rapport with individual students allows us to push them in ways one of us alone could not. This method of interrogation once again asks all of us to take responsibility for the choices we make in defining our spectatorial and discursive positions.

Risk in the classroom increases as we move from recognizing the constructedness of our positions towards defending or refiguring those positions. As a way of extending the accountability for our reactions that class texts demand, we incorporated a student-directed symposium in our Women's Studies class. In the symposium, structured around the notion of gender as a problem—i.e., a concept in process, students chose to research and present contemporary issues where gender is most salient in their lives. The emphasis of this class project was on developing and sharing strategies for confronting gender as a problem, a goal which necessitates establishing foundations without recourse to essential identities. By discussing how gender is defined in these issues and the strategies that respond and potentially alter those definitions, the symposium as a whole underscored the malleability of gender as a concept as well as the need to use it. Student topics ranged from pornography to consent law in rape cases to the legitimization of homosexual marriages. Drawing on a plethora of research methods, students were able to offer concrete workable solutions to the dilemmas they outlined: "decriminalizing" rather than "legalizing" prostitution, rewriting legal language to expose and excise its masculinist bias, and creating a platform based on "human rights" as a way to avoid the biology versus behavior impasse when seeking civil rights legislation for homosexuals. As a way to synthesize the implications of these

solutions on gender norms, we asked students to prepare a final response to the following questions: How do these strategies reconfigure, redefine, subvert, or leave untouched constructions of gender? Are those definitions of gender transferable from one symposium topic to another? How effective is "women" or "men" as a political category? What do you think are the benefits and drawbacks of a politics organized in these terms? And, finally, do your answers apply equally to racial, sexual, and class affiliations?

Because responses to these questions varied, our last class discussion became an example in and of itself of both the rewards and challenges of affinity politics. For instance, the student who advocated the re-writing of masculinist legal language found himself deconstructing the naturalized relationship between gender and language just as he was forced to recognize the material experiences that are shaped by that relationship. Consequently, the category "women" became both the problem and a part of the solution: while we need to expose the category "women" as inessential in order to rethink the masculinist bias of legal language, we must emphasize the brutal physical and psychic impact of rape in our culture as an experience almost exclusive to those marked as "women." At the same time, the student researching the legalization of homosexual marriages saw the overlap between the legal language surrounding rape and that of civil rights; in turn, she shifted the discussion by pointing out the heterosexual presumption that was ostensibly left unchecked by her classmate's analysis. The students working on pornography and prostitution brought class status to the center of the conversation as they asked their peers to focus on the relationship between legal agency and relative wealth. The students did not leave this final class discussion with clear answers to the questions we provided; indeed, they seemed to leave with more questions than answers. However, by presenting their individual symposium solutions within a forum shaped by the advocacy of affinity, the students were motivated to challenge each other's assumptions as a means of strengthing their roles as responsible writers and thinkers.

Our collaboration has taught us how affinity may serve to relocate accountability from *de facto* to constructed identities, to link ostensibly disparate texts and methods, and to bridge class goals with the greater social arena. By investigating the way language produces identities, we learn to take responsibility for the power of the language we use. That willingness to take responsibility and to risk translates into a classroom safety founded on a shared commitment to question what is most familiar to us. This process shifts the locus of authority from who says what to what one says in a given context.

Notes

1. Fuss goes on to offer an alternative to this law. She emphasizes both the inextricability of essentialist and anti-essentialist positions and the need to recognize the experiences students do bring to the classroom. Those experiences, she suggests, rather than standing as "the real," might instead "function as a window onto the complicated workings of ideology." She concludes, "'Essentially speaking,' we need both to theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously, to deconstruct those spaces to keep them from solidifying. Such a double gesture involves once again the responsibility to historicize, to examine each deployment of essence, each appeal to experience, each claim to identity in the complicated contextual frame in which it is made" (118).

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